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SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: Special Media Reaction: Conclusion of Ceasefire
Agreement Talks in Geneva between GOSL and LTTE

1. (U) Summary: The Sri Lankan media, in an avalanche of commentary on the just concluded ceasefire talks in Geneva, spun the outcome in different directions according to their traditional political tendencies. Comment in state-owned media chided the local independent media and international wire services for allegedly predicting a negative outcome to the discussions, and lauded the "strength" and "flexibility" of the government delegation in reaching a consensus with the LTTE on reinforcing the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA). The independent media noted disagreements among Sinhala and Tamil parties, and pro-LTTE media praised the outcome as a victory for the Tigers, forestalling international pressure against them. End Summary.

2. (U) Following the conclusion of talks between the Sri Lankan government (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on strengthening the Ceasefire Agreement in Geneva February 22 - 23, government-owned newspapers ran positive, celebratory headlines such as "Truce talks end on a successful note" (English Daily News, 2/24), "Army to fully support peace process" (Tamil Thinakaran, 2/25) and "'All Sri Lankans commend the success of peace talks. People in North and East happy about the decrease of violence" (Sinhala Dinamina, 2/25). The government-run Sunday Observer (2/26) emphasized the approval of "a cross section of society" -- including members of the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA), and anti-LTTE People's Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)-- for the efforts of both parties to reach a consensus on the CFA. A cartoon in the Sunday Observer (2/26) depicted an "overzealous publisher" trashing an edition of a newspaper headlining "Talks Fail." News programs on government-owned television stations Rupavahini and ITN (2/24-2/27) positively highlighted results of the CFA talks with statements such as "Switzerland welcomes the positive outcome of the Geneva talks between the government and the LTTE," and "Scholars and the people in the North and East hail the success of the Geneva talks."

3. (U) State editorialists praised the government's victories and emphasized alleged retreats on the part of the LTTE. The Sunday Observer's comment headlines

(2/26) included, "What, no distress signal from Celigny?" and "Balasingham retreats in Geneva." (Anton Balasingham was the LTTE's chief negotiator.) Ajith Samaranayake's weekly Sunday Essay column chastised the independent media for expecting to watch the government "eat humble pie."

¶4. (U) Mainstream independent media -- including independent Maharaja Television (MTV), the Daily Mirror and its sister Sinhala paper Lankadeepa, and the Sunday Leader -- painted a less rosy picture of the talks than did government media. Although headlines such as "Geneva CFA talks above expectations: Norway," (Daily Mirror, 2/25) initially expressed relief at the outcome of the talks, independent media quickly highlighted remaining points of contention between the government and the JHU, the break-away LTTE Karuna faction, and the Tigers themselves. The Daily Mirror (2/27), in four below-the-fold front-page stories, headlined, "JHU rejects Geneva agreement, wants CFA amended," "Karuna refuses to give up arms," "Tigers put government on notice after Geneva talks," and "Government says Ceasefire Agreement amended in Geneva." Sinhala daily Lankadeepa (2/27), in a second lead story, bannered, "If the government doesn't fulfill promises, we will resume the war path, Tamilselvan tells AFP." Another prominent headline in the same paper read, "Government did not bow its head like during the UNP regime; but we condemn the structure of the joint statement, says JVP."

¶5. (U) Editorialists in the mainstream independent media noted the Rajapaksa government's seeming new support for and praise of the CFA, despite its earlier criticism of the document. Independent MTV, often criticized for bias towards the opposition United National Party and India, noted

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(2/24), "The opposition leader says those who called the ceasefire agreement a breach of the constitution have now agreed to safeguard it." Independent Sinhala Sunday Iru Dina, sister paper of the Sunday Leader, argued, "Those who vehemently criticized Ranil Wickremesinghe's Ceasefire Agreement have suddenly endorsed it, withdrawing all their so-called 'patriotic' objections. While we express relief that Sri Lanka has not returned to war as the 'Red brothers' pledged, we are forced to ridicule their hypocrisy."

¶6. (U) In an often repeated misconception by the independent media, Daily Mirror political analyst Dharisha Bastians (2/25) claimed United States Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns had sent a secret message via Norwegian envoy Erik Solhiem to the LTTE in Kilinochchi threatening the Tigers with increased U.S. military aid to Sri Lanka should they opt to return to war, and speculated: "Balasingham and his team were only in Geneva as a result of intense international pressure." The editor of the prestigious independent Sunday Times newspaper offered measured praise for the outcome of the talks, noting: "No doubt the Norwegians and the Co-Chairs flexed their muscles and exerted pressure just in order to make their presence felt, especially when the LTTE delegation made noises about walk outs... The LTTE seemed prepared to be reasonable, whether [or not] this was due to international pressure."

¶7. (U) The nationalist media in both English and Sinhala praised the government's alleged hard line against the Tigers. Independent Sinhala Divaina, sister paper to the Island, (2/25) led with, "Tigers agree to end hostilities such as assassinations, child abductions, torture, threats; positive response from the government, too." The Sinhala nationalist media also speculated, however, that the talks had been tense and dramatic, on the verge of failure. The Island (2/25) led with, "Tigers threatened walk out at Swiss talks: negotiator," and (2/27) "Joint Declaration an amendment to CFA - Government," followed by, "JVP lauds

Government's handling of talks but condemns joint statement." The Sunday Island (2/26) reiterated Sri Lankan diplomats' and political analysts' hopes that the agreements reached in Geneva would be implemented in the two months before the second stage of talks in April, headlining, "Geneva balance sheet even. LTTE bargained on claymore [mines]."

¶8. (U) Independent Tamil and pro-LTTE media predictably portrayed the Geneva talks as a victory for the Tamils. The independent papers Virakesari and Thinakkural, as well as the pro-LTTE Sudar Oli, headlined, respectively: The government must implement all points agreed upon before April talks, or all else will become invalid - Tamilselvan" (Virakesari, 2/25), "Geneva talks a diplomatic victory to the Tigers - Anton Balasingham," (Thinakkural, 2/25) and "Tigers do not surrender to warnings - Anton Balasingham." (Sudar Oli) Tamil media also emphasized the influence of the international community. Virakesari bannered (2/26), "International community would soon approve the liberation struggle of the Tigers - P. Nadesan, Chief of LTTE police," and "Foreign governments put pressure on the government to implement the decisions taken in Geneva." Thinakkural (2/26) headlined, "Tigers did not go to Geneva under anybody's pressure or warning - Anton Balasingham," and "International pressure will come soon to control the paramilitary forces, say Diplomatic sources."

¶9. (U) The pro-LTTE Tamil daily Sudar Oli and website TamilNet also praised the talks as a victory for the LTTE, but noted discrepancies in the two parties' interpretations of the outcome. In dueling headlines, Sudar Oli (2/25) bannered, "CFA amended in Geneva, Government said yesterday" and "LTTE emphasizes: No amendments to CFA, we will never amend it." Thinakkural bannered, "Government has wrongly

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interpreted to the public the agreements made in Geneva - Tamilselvan." Like the mainstream English media, the pro-LTTE media reported break-away faction leader Karuna stated he would refuse to disarm despite the decisions reached by the government and LTTE in Geneva. It also quoted the JHU as saying, "We will never allow the government to disarm the paramilitary forces."

¶10. (SBU) Comment: The government went into these talks insisting the Ceasefire Agreement needed to be amended, whereas the LTTE repeatedly stated the only thing necessary was full implementation of the CFA without any amendments. Predictably, the pro-government and pro-LTTE media both spun the outcome as reflecting larger concessions on the opposing side. The government claimed the Tigers' allowing mention of child recruitment in the final statement amounted to an amendment to the CFA. The GOSL also claimed a small victory -- much hailed in government media -- in insisting on excluding the term "paramilitary" from the statement (with reference to the Karuna faction) since such an inclusion would have implied previous governmental violations of the agreement. For its part, the Tigers touted their determination to exclude discussion of formal amendments, as well as the government's acceptance of their responsibility for controlling all armed groups in government-controlled territory. Independent English and Tamil media highlighted the importance of the influence of the international community, even to the point of giving credit where credit was not necessarily due. Tamil media, on the other hand, continued to speculate that the world would soon recognize the "legitimate struggle" of the LTTE for a separate homeland. End Comment.

ENTWISTLE